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SUBJECT: PUTIN'S PRESSFEST

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11. (SBU) Summary: Hosting a record number of journalists for a marathon three-and-a-half hour session on February 1, President Putin was relaxed and seemed to enjoy displaying his mastery of facts. Putin was upbeat and positive, especially in describing Russia's economic picture. Some commentators were not impressed by his performance, however, telling us that salesmanship notwithstanding, the journalists had not challenged his sometimes disingenuous answers and that there had been a few chinks in the armor. End Summary.

Good Performance For an Easy Crowd, As Expected

12. (SBU) President Putin's seventh annual press conference on February 1 set records in terms of the number of journalists (1232), questions (65), and minutes (211). Institute of National Strategy Director Stanislav Belkovskiy described the journalists to us as too pliant. Mercator Group President Dmitry Oreshkin concurred, but noted that all of Putin's press conferences have been done this way and it would have been naive to expect otherwise. Oreshkin noted that Putin had skillfully sidestepped questions about Litvinenko and Belarus.

13. (SBU) In the opinion of Novaya Gazeta Editor Andrey Lipskiy, Putin seemed at pains to reassure his audience that all was going well. Oreshkin agreed, and thought that the President had exuded self-confidence and created an atmosphere of satisfaction, certainty, and optimism.

14. (U) Although Putin touched on Security Council Secretary Igor Ivanov's Tehran trip on January 28, there was no subsequent press attention.

Dissatisfaction with Putin's Disingenuousness

15. (SBU) "Pro et Contra" Editor Masha Lipman, a Putin critic, argued that Putin had been "hypocritical" by repeatedly refusing to use the word "successor." Citing public opinion polls, media discussion, and elite opinion, Lipman derided the notion that Putin would not name a successor. She thought it hypocritical that he had proposed a free press and civil society as a solution to corruption and rejected his insistence that governors are not appointed. Lipman could recall no case where Putin's nominee for governor had been rejected by the local legislature, as Putin had said during the press conference.

¶6. (SBU) Belkovskiy found it disingenuous of Putin to state that the Russian economy was no longer so dependent on oil and gas and that the social sphere was improving. He did, however, believe Putin's assertion that Russia would not use its energy resources for strategic ends. Belkovskiy claimed that Russia's oil and gas wealth was instead used for the benefit of Gazprom and the businesspeople linked to it.

Lapses Detected

¶7. (SBU) Lipskiy also detected an occasional lapse in Putin's performance such as when a journalist asked about the problems the mayor of Arkhangelsk, who has presidential aspirations, was encountering. Lipskiy told us Putin dropped all pretense of democracy in telling the journalist that the mayor has "problems with the governor" that the mayor has to sort out.

Putin's Silence Sign of Weak "Successor"?

¶8. (SBU) Center for Political Technologies Tatyana Stanovaya concluded that Putin's refusal to identify whom he would support as Russia's next president until the presidential campaign had begun, which she believed meant after the Duma election, indicated a weak successor. Noting that Putin also had several times called for a consolidation of forces and had suggested that United Russia and A Just Russia should unite on strategic matters, Stanovaya suggested that Russia's next president would be in need of united support.

¶9. (SBU) Ekho Moskvi journalist Yevgeniya Albats noted Putin's emphasis on the need to consolidate the changes in government that he had started in order to guarantee Russia's

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continued development. This emphasis on consolidation rather than on the qualities of a successor suggested to her that the search was still on-going.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) President Putin ably demonstrated why he has such high approval ratings with Russians. His confident, at times jocular, tone conveyed a message of control and calm. While he disappointed those looking for clues about 2008 and left much to be desired in the eyes of some professional commentators, he sent out comforting messages: noting the need to focus on addressing economic inequality and several times reminding Russians that they will choose their leaders.
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